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CRY OF OUR BOARD  
SCHOOL CHILDREN

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THE

*Cry of our Board School Children.*

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A S E R M O N

PREACHED AT THE

**St. John's Wood Synagogue,**

*ON SABBATH, פ' תולדות, 5655, DECEMBER 1st, 1894,*

BY THE

REV DR. ADLER,

*CHIEF RABBI.*

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## *The Cry of our Board School Children.*

כִּי יִדְעֹתִי לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו  
וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶרֶךְ יְיָ לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט :

“For I have loved him, because he will command his children and his household after him that they shall keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment.”—*Genesis* xviii. 19.

MY DEAR BRETHREN,

Commentators and preachers are fond of indulging in speculations as to what constituted the sovereign merit of our father Abraham. There are some who laud his faith, others who extol his unquestioning obedience, others again who dwell with praise on his unselfishness and love of peace. But the Bible itself does not leave us in any uncertainty on this point. The Lord bestows on Abraham the supremest distinction which mortal man can enjoy. He is about to declare unto him His purpose concerning the doomed cities of the plain. And we are told why the Lord considers him worthy of this

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pre-eminent privilege. "For I have loved him, because he will command his children and his household after him that they shall keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment."

Great and momentous words—to which every father and mother, every man and woman in Israel should hearken in sacred awe, constituting, as these words do, the declaration of the paramount duty incumbent upon them. God had chosen Abraham as His friend, had set His love upon him, because He knew that His faithful servant would not content himself with being God-fearing and righteous himself, but would regard it as his most solemn obligation and his choicest privilege to train his children and the members of his household to be God-fearing and righteous even as he sought to be, and to keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment.

And, in sooth, it is this line of conduct only which can prove whether we are in earnest about our religious convictions, whether we are sincere in our faith. For, granted that we are self-controlled and observant ourselves, this cannot as yet be adopted as a certain and trustworthy test of our virtue and piety. Our parents may have been pious before us, and we would fain not dishonour their memory. Our conformity may be due to the force of habit, or may spring from reluctance to break with cherished associa-

tions. But if we exhort our children to make our way and rule of life their own, if we prove to them that adherence to our ancestral faith ennobles and elevates, beautifies and brightens our career upon earth, if we diligently teach them the letter and the spirit of Judaism, and if we do not limit such teaching to our children, but extend it to all whom our influence may reach, then we show that our religious faith is not a mere sham and conventionality, but a blessed reality, we then prove ourselves to be worthy descendants of Abraham, the beloved of God.

My dear brethren, Think you that I have come to you to-day to utter mere rhetorical flourishes and homiletic commonplaces touching the excellence and necessity of religious education? No. My purpose is thoroughly and intensely practical. There is a certain occupation, which I may term crisis-mongering, indulged in both in the political world and in our narrower communal circles. There are people who proclaim a communal crisis when there is hardly aught amiss, and who, on the other hand, call Peace, Peace, when danger and disaster threaten the highest interests of the community. And I maintain unhesitatingly that we are within measurable distance of such danger and disaster.

Most of you remember the time when the Free School, the Infant School, and Stepney Schools

sufficed for the education of the children of our working classes residing in the East. But for the last fourteen years a great change has been at work. Besides the normal increase of population, there has been a steady inflow of immigrants from Russia and Poland, an inflow which in some years assumed very large dimensions. Where were their children to be educated? Our communal schools were already full to overflowing. We could not afford to establish and to maintain new schools. Nor indeed did an absolute and indispensable necessity exist for the erection of such schools, seeing that the Education Act of 1870 made ample provision for the primary secular training of every child in the land—the Education Act which has been so beneficent in its operation, and which tends to realise the wise forecast, that “whoever opens a school closes a prison.” And thus it has come to pass that there are at present seven Board Schools in East London, in which the largest proportion of scholars consists of Jews. On visiting any of these institutions, even the most sceptical will be convinced of the material increase in our Eastern population. You look around, and wherever you turn, there is the unmistakable Jewish cast of countenance, lit up with intelligence, brightened by vivacity, here and there, I fear, telling a sad tale of privation, of unwholesome dwelling and



insufficient food. Some of these pupils, at first, are hardly able to speak one word of English.

As soon as Jewish children began to attend a Board School, the question pressed itself upon us, How shall we provide for their moral and religious training? The Association for the Diffusion of Religious Knowledge attempted to cope with this grave responsibility, and at present 4,555 children are being taught Hebrew and religion at seven different Board Schools on Sunday mornings, and in the afternoons of certain week days, with a staff of ninety-eight teachers, at the extraordinarily low cost of just a little over five shillings for each scholar. This remarkably small expenditure is primarily due to the fact that our devoted Secretary, on whom the task of administration and supervision falls, undertakes his onerous duties as a labour of love, "not for price nor reward."

Now we should have been justified in assuming that the community would have seconded our efforts with the utmost alacrity, and provided us liberally with the funds required to impart efficiently the indispensable religious and moral instruction. For, just see what an immense saving the assumption of this responsibility has effected in the communal purse. How enormous would have been the expense of providing for the secular instruction of 8,000 Jewish children

taught at present in the Board Schools of East London? And yet what are the sad facts? Our Board School Religious Class Fund is starved, our chest is empty, our indebtedness for expenses of past work amounts to £600, without any provision for the work during the ensuing year, so that we have been obliged to issue an urgent Interim Appeal, which I earnestly hope will not pass unheeded.

The results of this inadequate support are not creditable to the Anglo-Jewish community. In the first instance, I regret to say it, not all the pupils of the Board Schools which I have named, receive the needful religious training. We have neither sufficient teachers nor sufficient classrooms. As it is, in some of the schools, as many as 130 pupils are under the charge of one master or mistress. Many, nay, most of our teachers, are inadequately paid. As we cannot afford to rent additional rooms, I am grieved to say that in one of our schools the poor pupils are, even in this cold weather, compelled to receive their lessons while standing in a corridor, shivering on the cold flagstones, exposed to draughts and discomfort, ill-shod and insufficiently clad as they are. Then there are numbers of Jewish children who attend other Board Schools in Stepney, Shacklewell, and Finsbury Park, who are at present absolutely without any organised religious instruction whatever.

Dear congregants, I ask you, Is this a state of things worthy of Anglo-Judaism? We are not devoid of noble impulses. We have established schools in our midst of whose excellence we are justly proud. But is it just, is it logical, that we should bestow all possible care upon those children who have been fortunate enough to gain admission into the Free School or the Stepney School, or our denominational schools in other districts, while we neglect the others who are pupils of Board Schools? Are we ready to transmit the Abrahamic mission to the one section, while we ruthlessly withhold it from the other? Do we not seem to hear the anxious plaint of the little ones who plead : הַבְּרָכָה אַחַת הוּא לְךָ אָבִי, "Hast thou but one blessing, my father?" בְּרַכְנִי גַם אֲנִי אָבִי, "Bless us, even us, also, our father."

What is the reason for the insufficient support afforded by the bulk of the metropolitan Jews to this work? I admit that the religious training provided for the children attending Board Schools is not ideally perfect, but it is not inferior to the nature of the instruction given in our denominational schools. We endeavour to teach our Board School children that to love God and to deserve His love, to know His moral attributes and to emulate them, to understand His behests and to keep them is our life's most glorious and most solemn task. The reason for this lack of interest is

solely to be found in the fact that we have nothing to show to the public in return for their contributions, no imposing building, no high-sounding praises of Her Majesty's Inspector—nothing, in fact, that appeals to the senses, nothing that stirs the communal fancy or that flatters our communal vanity. But shall the classes on that account be summarily closed? Shall these little ones be permitted to grow up as heathens? Are we, indeed, about to relinquish one of the primary obligations devolving upon a Hebrew congregation to provide religious instruction for the children of its poor? Such an abdication of its function would redound to the perpetual disgrace of a prosperous and intelligent community such as ours.

Two earnest and thoughtful members of our Committee have prepared a scheme for averting such a catastrophe—a scheme which is now being submitted to the several religious organisations in our community, a scheme that is perfectly simple and straightforward. It provides that, to supplement the utterly inadequate contributions of the direct subscribers to the Association, each synagogue member shall permit himself to be taxed with an additional certain small sum—say, eighteenpence for each pound in his synagogue account—this small rate to be devoted to the provision of religious education for the children of

our poor attending the Board Schools. In accordance with the wholesome English principle that there shall be no taxation without representation, it is proposed that each Synagogue organisation shall, in future, have a voice in the administration of the funds it contributes. This scheme, as you know, is now being carefully considered and analysed by delegates appointed for the purpose.

As was to be anticipated, some objections to this project have been advanced. It has been asked, Why should a rate be added to the Synagogue bill just for this purpose? Might not the Board of Guardians, might not the Committee of the Jews' Hospital and Orphan Asylum, apply for this facility with an equal show of reason? Undoubtedly, though their work is, perhaps, less immediately and directly associated with a religious organisation. But they have not done so, because their needs, happily, are not so instant as ours, because they are not confronted, as we unhappily are, by an utter paralysis and collapse of our efforts. Strong and striking are the claims made upon our bounty by the sight of starvation, wretchedness, and orphanhood. But just because these demands are so powerful and striking they are likely to be met with an eager welcome. Not so with the demands made by moral ignorance, the claims of spiritual destitution. However imperious and clamorous these wants

may be, they do not appeal to the eye, and are therefore in danger of being overlooked. At a time like this, when our fellow-citizens are still agitated by a mighty controversy in respect to the nature of the religious education to be imparted to the Christian pupils of Board Schools, shall we Jews—we, to whom the very idea of religion and morality was first revealed—shall we allow our children to grow up in benighted, aye, besotted ignorance? Shall we remain deaf to their cry? What purpose can be more germane to a Synagogue organisation than that of religious and Hebrew instruction?

Nothing to my mind is more instructive, but also more saddening, than to read of what happened some years ago in the neglected Jewish colony in the interior of China. About sixty years since a Jewish house of prayer was still standing in Kaefungfoo, but there was no one to teach Judaism. The members of that colony possessed books of the Law, but there were none among them who could understand a word of Hebrew. And so in despair they pulled down their temple and sold the stones of that venerable edifice, and the timber thereof. For, in truth, of what avail is the stateliest edifice, if there exist no longer any knowledge and love of Judaism?

I, therefore, appeal with all earnestness to the Members of the Council of the United Synagogue

that they may readily accept and warmly approve the project submitted to them. I doubt not that this good work will obtain the co-operation of our Sephardim brethren, and of the Members of the West London Synagogue, whose interest in the welfare of our poor is surely not inferior to ours. And we know that the Federation of Synagogues in the East will aid, as far as their means permit, in furthering a scheme intended primarily to benefit the children of the poor.

But for the success of this new departure, the resolutions of Council, Mahamad, and Board of Management will not suffice. We need the whole-hearted, loyal concurrence of each Synagogue member in the metropolis that he will pay without murmur and cavil the small amount hereafter to be added to his half-yearly account. I appeal to every one of you. During a debate on Alien Immigration that took place in the House of Lords during last session, it was stated that the presence of so many foreigners in our midst constituted a danger and a menace. Harsh and unmannerly words! And yet I am bound to confess that if we fail rightly to train the children of these immigrants, and to imbue them with a full knowledge of their duties to God and man, a menace and a danger, Heaven forbid! they will become.

During the last sacred festivals that we cele-

brated we implored the Lord for many boons. Knowing that we had no merits on which to rely, we besought Him, for the sake of the Patriarchs, the holy men of old, and the glorious band of martyrs. But, as a climax of all, we entreated our Heavenly Father, לְמַעַן הַיְלֻקוֹת נָשָׁל, בֵּית רַבָּן, “for the sake of the school children.” And similarly for the sake of the school children, whose future will make or mar Anglo-Judaism, I beseech, I earnestly entreat you, do not reject the scheme that will ere long be submitted to you. Do not turn a deaf ear to the plaint of our little ones, “Bless me, even me also, O my father!” So that they also may be enabled to inherit and preserve the Abrahamic message and mission, to show forth to the world the purity of life and the purity of faith; so that they also may help to realise the gracious promise vouchsafed to our Patriarch, “In thy offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because that Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”





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